

Palestine Essays – No. 4

DO JEWS HAVE
A "DIVINE RIGHT"
TO PALESTINE?

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FOREWORD

The following pages contain some observations on the Zionist contentions, that the title to Palestine, claimed by or on behalf of the Jews, rests on certain promises made by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and on certain predictions uttered by the Prophets during the Babylonian Exile; and that, therefore, the establishment of the state of Israel, through the Zionist occupation of Palestinian territories in 1948, is a fulfillment of Divine promises and an attainment of claimed «Divine Rights» of Jews to the Holy Land.

The Scriptural passages invoked in these contentions fall into two broad categories:

1. Prophecies, uttered during the Babylonian Exile, predicting a return to Palestine, from Babylon and from all the lands whither the Jews had been exiled; and
2. Promises of the possession of Palestine by the descendants of Abraham.

Inasmuch as they are essentially distinct, and their respective degrees of relevance to the topic of our inquiry unequal, these two groups of Scriptural passages are examined separately, in Sections I and II of this essay.

In Section III, we shall inquire into the new light which the Christian Gospel sheds on the Old Testament passages under examination.

I.

PREDICTIONS OF A RETURN FROM THE BABYLONIAN EXILE

During the Babylonian Exile, the Prophets taught that a remnant of the Jews would return to Palestine, re-build the Temple and the Walls of Jerusalem, and restore the religious life of the community.

They were clear prophecies of concrete practical events. They were predictions of a return from a specific exile.

They were not — nor did they purport to be — predictions of a recurrent act of return, foreseen as inevitably following every act of dispersal which might occur in the future. The Prophets did not forecast perpetual return as a necessary follow-up to every exile.

These predictions of a return from a specific exile — the Babylonian Exile — were in fact fulfilled. The Temple and the Walls of Jerusalem were indeed rebuilt. A period of political independence, under the Maccabees, was indeed secured. In short, what the Prophets had predicted, has been fully accomplished.

Having been already fulfilled, the prophecies of the return cannot be viewed as still awaiting fulfillment. One cannot validly read into them what they did not proclaim. Nor can one attribute to them what they did not envisage, and build upon them a case for a «second return» from a subsequent exile which occurred after the predicted return from the earlier exile had already taken place.

It cannot be over-emphasized that, within the Old Testament, there is no prophecy of a «second return» after the return from the Babylonian Exile.

II.

PROMISES OF POSSESSION OF PALESTINE

A. The Promises Cited

In a study he published concerning these promises, Professor Guillaume summed them up as follows :

«The first explicit promise of Palestine to the descendants of Abraham was at Schechem (now Nablus) in Genesis xii. 7 : 'Unto thy Seed will I give this land.'

«Chapter xiii. 15, when Abraham is standing on a hill near Bethel, has the words : 'All the land which thou seest to thee will I give it and to thy seed for ever.'

«Chapter xv. 18 is more explicit : 'Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.'

«The promises are repeated to Isaac ; and to Jacob in xxviii. 12 : 'The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed, and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south ; in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'

«When Abraham made a covenant with God through circumcision (xvii. 8) all the land of Canaan was promised to him as 'an everlasting possession.'

«Other passages might be quoted, but these are representative, and others add nothing that is relevant here.»

B. Who Are The Heirs To These Promises

It is evident from the Scriptural passages cited above and from similar passages, that the promises, were made to Abraham and his «seed» in the first instance. When they were subsequently made to Isaac and Jacob and their «seed», no exclusion of other descendants of Abraham was indicated. The inclusiveness of the earlier promises was not cancelled by the relative narrowness of the later ones.

Inasmuch as the Jews are not the **only** descendants of Abraham, there can be **no** justification for the claim that they are the only heirs to the promise of Palestine to «Abraham and his seed». And, inasmuch as **not all** Jews are descendants of Abraham, there can be no justification for the claim that all Jews — i.e., Jews as Jews — are heirs to the promise of Palestine.

In other words, the Zionist contention that, on the authority of the Divine promises recorded in the Old Testament, Palestine belongs to **ALL** Jews and to Jews **ALONE**, is contradicted by two facts: first, that many **NON-Jews** are descendants of Abraham; and, secondly, that a sizable proportion of Jews are **NOT** descendants of Abraham.

1. Many Non-Jews are Descendants of Abraham :

Apart from Muslim tradition, there is ample evidence in the Old Testament itself that the term, «the seed of Abraham», includes Arabs. For, through Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael, who was born to Abraham by Hagar the Egyptian, many an Arab tribe came to be among the offspring of Abraham; and, through his second wife, Keturah, Abraham became the father of other Arab tribes also. (Genesis xxv. 1-4; and I. Chronicles i. 32).

It is significant that in the same passage in which God says to Abraham, «In Isaac shall thy seed be called», he adds that

Ishmael also «is thy seed.» (Genesis xxi. 12, 13). The narrowing-down of the scope of the term, «seed of Abraham», in subsequent promises, did not cancel the initial inclusiveness of that term.

Furthermore, many of the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob — i.e., many of the «seed of Abraham» in the narrower sense of the term — are among the non-Jews whose exclusion would seem to be suggested by the unwarranted identification of the «seed of Abraham» with the «Jews». For a large proportion of the exiled Jews preferred to remain where they were, when other Jews returned to the Holy Land after the Babylonian Exile; and those Jews who chose not to return formed the Diaspora, subsequently becoming the backbone of the Christian Church and an ethnically indistinguishable component of the population of the Near East.

2. Many Jews are not Descendants Abraham :

Just as many non-Jews are among the descendents of Abraham, so too many Jews are not of the seed of Abraham.

For, throughout the centuries, conversion and proselytization have introduced into the ranks of Jews many who were not of the offspring of Abraham.

Thus, several centuries before Christ, «many from among the peoples of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them», according to the Book of Esther (viii. 17).

Even in Christ's time, proselytization was not unknown; and we have it on the authority of Christ Himself that scribes and pharisees used to «compass sea and land to make one proselyte» (Matthew xxiii. 15).

Nor did the practice end with the later dispersal of Jews. For example, According to the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (Vol. VI,

pp. 375-378), wholesale conversion of the Khazars of Russia to Judaism occurred in the Eighth Century A.D.

It is, one trusts, unnecessary to cite further evidence testifying to the fact that, even among the Jews, racial purity is non-existent.

3. *Conclusion: The «seed of Abraham» is INDETERMINABLE :*

The inescapable conclusion of the two afore-mentioned sets of facts is that the seed of Abraham is today indeterminable.

One can no more establish who, among Jews, is a descendant of Abraham, than authoritatively determine who, among certain groups of non-Jews, is not of the seed of Abraham. After more than thirty-five centuries of ethnic intermingling, dispersal, and conversion, the progeny of Abraham is no longer capable of accurate identification. The «seed of Abraham» is indistinguishable, genealogically or biologically; and the identification of «Jews» with «descendants of Abraham» is a dual mistake.

Most assuredly, then, the over-simplified Zionist contention, that the Jews of today are the heirs to the promises made to Abraham (and repeated to Isaac and Jacob) with respect to possession of Palestine, is inaccurate from the standpoint of both its exclusiveness and its inclusiveness.

It follows, too, that no one can validly invoke the promises recorded in the Scriptures to justify his claim to Palestine on the basis of descent from Abraham.

C. Were The Promises Revoked ?

In an article in which he examined the relevance of the promises under discussion to recent events in Palestine, the Rev. Dr. Oswald T. Allis wrote:

«This promise was conditioned on obedience to the will of God. Note the word, 'because thou hast obeyed my voice' (Genesis xxii. 18) and also Genesis xxvi. 5, where the renewal of the covenant with Isaac is explained by the words, 'because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.'

«This basic principle, that possession of the land and prosperity in it was conditioned on obedience, is stressed again and again. It is made especially clear in the solemn warnings in Leviticus xxvi and Deuteronomy xxviii; and it is definitely declared that to be 'scattered among the nations' will be the punishment of disobedience (cf. Deut. iv. 27).

«These prophecies plainly foretold the course of Israel's history..... Certainly the Old Testament teaches both prophetically and historically that possession of the land was conditioned on obedience to Him who had given it to Abraham His 'friend' (Isa. xli. 8)».

Similarly, Professor Guillaume writes:

«Had we no prophetic messages to guide us it would be apparent that these promises of possession of the land of Canaan were not unconditional the covenant relation between Israel and God demanded loyalty from the people, and individual and corporate righteousness. Were the people to fail in these respects a terrible doom awaited them.»

Of direct relevance to this discussion is Christ's parable of the wicked husbandmen, which He concluded with the words:

«The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof» (Matthew xxi. 33-46).

III.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

It is in the light of the Christian Gospel that a Christian must understand the abiding truth and relevance of the promises recorded in the Old Testament.

For, in the Gospel of Christ, a new dimension of human existence, and of the God-man encounter, is revealed; and, viewed from the vantage-point of this new dimension, whatever subsisted on the older dimension is transfigured and appears transformed.

A. Old Concepts : New Meanings

1. «*The Law*»

«Ye have heard that it was said... but I say unto you...» With these words, repeated again and again in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ offers a re-interpretation of many of the basic tenets of the Law — the Law which He came «not to destroy but to fulfill» (Matthew v. 17-48).

2. *Nationalistic vs. Universal Faith*

The parochialism, provincialism, or «nationalism» of the Jewish traditions gave way, in Christ's Gospel, to a world-embracing universalism.

If Abraham was told, «In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed» (Genesis xii. 3), Nicodemus was assured: «For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life» (John iii. 16).

The Apostles preached a Gospel that recognized no distinction between Jew and Gentile, bond and free.

«The mystery of Christ,» asserted Paul the Apostle, «which in other generations was not made known unto the sons of men, as it hath now been revealed» is «that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.» (Ephesians iii. 4-6).

He Who, early in His earthly ministry, had told the Canaanitish woman, «I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel» (Matthew xv. 24). commanded His disciples, after His passion and before His ascension, saying, «Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...» (Matthew xxviii. 19).

He incurred the wrath of the Jews for rebuking the narrow nationalism of their faith (Luke iv. 23-29).

3. *«Children of Abraham»*

The tribalistic belief in a «chosen people» was transcended within the context of a revolutionary universalism which emphasized the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

Privileges derived from, or based upon, racialistic ties or descent from a common ancestor lost their *raison d'être* and their very grounds within the context of the new doctrine. The biological acceptance of the term «children of Abraham» was ridiculed and boldly challenged.

Said John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees : «Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.» (Matthew iii. 9).

When unbelieving Jews protested, «We are Abraham's seed, and have never been in bondage to any man... Our father is Abraham,» Jesus retorted: «If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.» (John viii. 31-59).

4. «Israel»

Just as the biological concept of descent from Abraham gave way to a spiritual concept, so too did «Israel of the flesh» give way to «Israel of the spirit». Wrote Paul in his Epistle to the Romans: «They are not all Israel, that are of Israel» (ix. 6); «By their unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by thy faith... God spared not the natural branches...» (xi. 20, 21).

5. Not «Where» – But «In What Spirit»

Within the revolutionary re-interpretation of old concepts which the Christian Gospel introduces, the spiritual importance of places as such vanishes, giving way to emphasis on the spirit; it is the spirit alone that possesses importance. When the Samaritan woman inquired: «Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship,» Jesus replied:

«The hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father... The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.» (John iv. 19-25).

B. «Land, City & Temple Have Lost Their Religious Importance»

The joint impact of these and related Christian re-interpretations of Old Testament concepts, on the endeavor of Zionism and its Christian apologists to invoke the authority of the Scriptures

for justifying the secular, political program of Zionism, may best be summed up in the following words of Dr. Allis:

«Under the Christian dispensation, the land, the city, and the temple have lost the importance that formerly attached to them.

«According to the Law of Moses it was almost a necessity for a believing Israelite to live in or near the land of Canaan. The tabernacle, and later the temple, was the center of worship for his people, He was required to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the three annual feasts. For him Jerusalem and the temple had unique significance and importance.

«For the Christian, whether he be Gentile or Jew, all this is changed. A believing Jew is today as near heaven in the United States... as if he were in Jerusalem. An unbelieving Jew is just as far from heaven in Jerusalem as he would be in New York or London.

«For the Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, the land of Palestine has a sentimental interest. But that is all.

«It is only the Jew who still lives more or less in the Old Testament dispensation who regards the possession of the land as important. And part of its importance to him is due to racial pride and nationalistic aspirations».

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